

Pastoral Affection

Philippians 4:1

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What does a pastor speak on after a Sabbatical? Let me tell you one thing that happened while I was gone. The only life I've known for 17 years is doing community with this church—year after year in your ups and downs and my ups and downs. The first week away was really, really great. The second week was really great. The third week was great. But somewhere in there I really started to miss the church and fellowship and friendship. In fact, the Elders gave the DEFCON 5 warning: don't talk to the DeWitts. So it was quiet; too quiet. We missed the fellowship.

It has me thinking about the relationship between shepherds and their sheep. Pastors and their flock. Elders and leaders and their people. Clearly it is a very important relationship. What does it look like when it is healthy, virtuous, and pleasing to both God and the church?

Clearly Jesus is the Chief Shepherd and there are many portions of Scripture that use this pastoral language to describe our relationship with him: the shepherd who leaves the 99 to retrieve the lost one as an example.

In God's good plan, he provides under-shepherds, human shepherds who love and lead the church. We have many shepherds here with our Elders, pastors, staff, small group leaders, counselors, and others. I am mostly focusing on the pastor/flock relationship today. How should that relationship "feel" when it is as it ought to be?

Let's look at one verse in Philippians. Paul begins the letter with very affectionate language for this church he started. You may recall his providential meeting of Lydia praying by the creek in Philippi. He says in chapter 1, *I thank my God in all my remembrance of you* (1:3), and *I hold you in my heart* (1:7). The apostle who is famous for his doctrinal intellect is also a great lover of people with a capacity for deep feelings of affection.

Philippians 4:1 comes on the heels of a very strong statement in 3:20-21 concerning the future for the Christian. In contrast to those who persecute us, our end is not destruction but glory, resurrection, and eternal life.

"Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved." (Philippians 4:1 ESV)

Let's just walk the text and notice how he refers to them. How we speak to people says a lot about how we feel about people. I remember my adopted grandparents. They were old and had been married for years, but grandpa always called grandma, *Gorge*, short for *Gorgeous*.

My point today is that pastors and churches get along well when shepherds love and lead sheep who enjoy them doing so.

Love Well

My Brothers

This is very common language in the New Testament as Christians viewed themselves as family, indeed the family of God. Brothers. Sisters. Father. Son. All of these are used in the New Testament to emphasize that we are a true family—united in Christ—sons and daughters of the Most High God.

Whom I love and long for/My Beloved

This may be the most affectionate verse penned by the Apostle Paul. *Love* and *beloved* are both that famous Greek word for love, *agape*, which is most often used to describe love that is entirely focused on the good of the other. A love that sacrifices. A love that serves. Paul was for them. He wasn't against them, using them, or hurting them. Even his admonitions and rebukes flowed out of a desire for their best.

This past week our daughter became very sick. We took her at night to the ER and had to restrain her as they did some unpleasant tests on her. Her eyes darted back and forth from Mommy and Daddy almost as if to say, "I thought you loved me!" It broke our hearts. We kept saying, "We love you so much!" It was because we loved her that we had to do it.

That's *agape* love. That's shepherd love. That's how Jesus looks at us in our pain and hurt, reassuring us that he does indeed love us and there is not a painful path we will walk that he didn't walk on his Calvary road.

Human shepherds will love their sheep and seek for them to know it. Paul said it. "*Whom I love and long for...my beloved.*"

My joy and crown

This is no small statement when we realize where Paul writes this from. He was under house arrest in Rome. He was chained to a guard. It was not a pleasant circumstance, yet Paul was joyful. He was joy-filled as he thought about the Philippians. Their faith. Their love. Their lives. They were his joy.

And his crown? This sounds a little strange to us. It becomes understandable when we realize the unique word used here is not the crown of royalty but the crown of victory. It's the one given to the winner of the race. They were his crown in that Paul looked ahead to the judgment seat of Christ and was convinced his leadership and investment in the Philippian Christians would be a crown of commendation for him from Christ himself.

Do you hear the pastoral affection? How critical it is that shepherds and sheep love one another.

This is a precious commodity and it must be preserved very carefully. How are we doing? I will tell you from my perspective, my Sabbatical absence definitely made the heart grow fonder. I am as excited about our church as God seems to be flinging doors open in front of us. As we move forward together, how important it is that we do so with love for one another.

Lead Well

Some people think, *"All we need is love, love; love is all we need."* If pastors would just love, then everything else would be fine in the church. Loving well requires leading well. Leading well means, to quote 2 Timothy 3:16 (NIV), *"...teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."* A pastor is not a good pastor who simply loves well, as much as some may admire him. Good pastoring requires leading, and to lead well means to set a direction, to admonish—occasionally say the hard word. Good shepherds have the rod and the staff for a reason.

We see Paul using that rod and staff in this text. He exhorts them, in light of this glorious resurrection and eternal life, "Stand firm! Don't give up. Don't retreat!" All leaders must exhort the team. We get it. But notice the next verse; it's one of my favorites. *Pastor Steve, if only we could get back to New Testament Christianity, then everybody would love each other and get along great and always agree on everything. If only the Apostle Paul was our pastor, then we'd really feel the love all the time.* Really? You haven't read the New Testament. Guess what first century Christians were like? A lot like us.

"I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord." (Philippians 4:2 ESV)

This may surprise you, but there were two women in this Philippian church who once were friends but at this time they were not getting along! Who ever heard of such a thing? Two women on the outs with each other. They used to be BFFs but now....

Even the New Testament church with all that apostolic love and miracles, struggled to get along. Philippi is Lydia. Philippi is the earthquake and the Philippian jailer. Philippi is the famous letter about joy and rejoicing. In spite of all of that, there were two women on the outs with each other, everybody knew it, and they were called out by name. Their spat was documented in Holy Scripture. In heaven people meet Syntyche and say, "You and Euodia still not getting along?"

What's the point? Good shepherds love well. Good sheep do too. Good shepherds lead well and strive for the unity of the church. Good sheep do as well. This side of glory there are no perfect shepherds, no perfect sheep, and no perfect churches. Yet we must strive for it.

Sometimes the brokenness of the church only serves to highlight the glory of Christ—the one true and faithful shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. All the Euodias and Syntyches in the church, all the spats about this, that, and the other, all the imperfections we may see in shepherds, all of it points us to our future. There we will not only live in perfect unity, but we will know the love of the great Shepherd of our souls, Jesus. *"Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face."* (1 Corinthians 13:12)

All the love and affections between good shepherds and good sheep on earth are little reflections of what we really want, to be with Christ and to experience his love in all its eternal fullness.

So while I missed you with pastoral affection, the sense that something was missing in my life is really a gift to lead me to who my heart really misses, Jesus. "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine, O what a foretaste of glory divine."

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